

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Gardens That Are Always Minty Fresh

Mint is unquestionably the dominant flavor of our everyday world. It seems that you can't leave the house without dealing with mint-flavored dental floss, toothpaste, and mouthwash, and even mint-scented shampoo.

Recently, many of us watched the Kentucky Derby while sipping mint juleps, or enjoyed an after dinner mint — maybe even one of those too-sweet crème de menthe cordials. Then there are the breath mints, chewing gums, and so on.

Actually, it's not too surprising that mint enjoys such incredible popularity. For more than 2,500 years, mint has been renowned for its refreshing aroma and medicinal qualities. Pliny credits mint with curing 41 assorted ailments, and pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), a mint-cousin, with treating another 20.

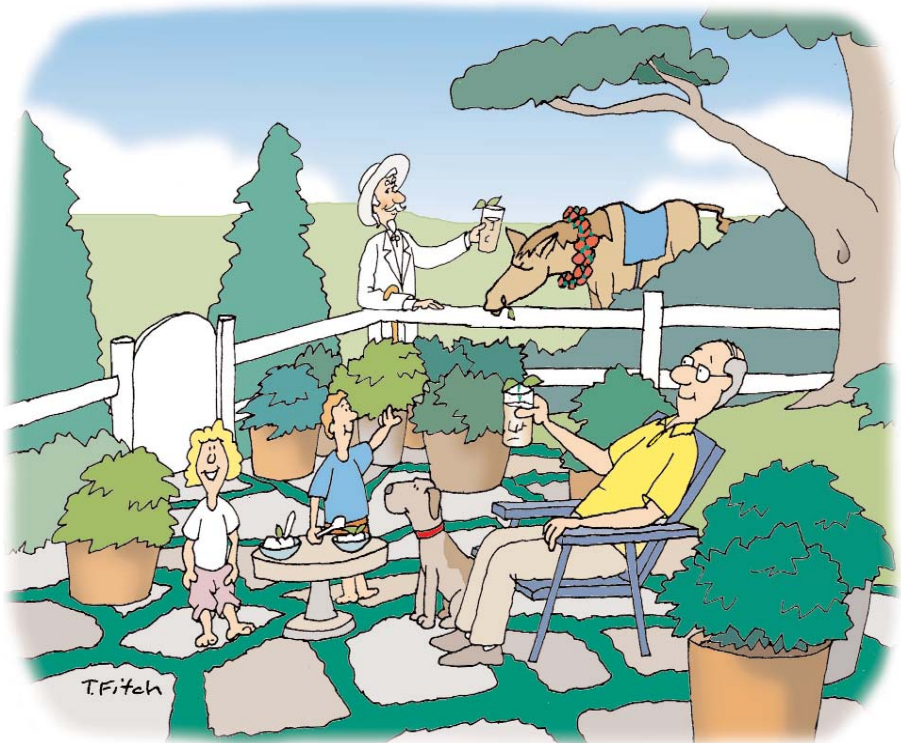
Ancient Greeks used wreaths of mint for everything from adorning brides to staving off the effects of a wine-laden bacchanal. Greeks and Romans both employed it to scent bath water, and even suggested its use as an aphrodisiac. A more sober Aristotle actually cautioned against letting soldiers use mint, concerned that it would weaken their aggressiveness.

From curing stomach aches, dandruff, snakebite, and roundworms, to dispelling fleas and amorous dreams, there was a mint for every purpose.

For gardeners, much the same can be said, considering that there are about 20 species of mint and approximately 1,000 interesting hybrids. Even a run-of-the-mill garden or seed catalog will probably offer about one dozen choices, although the most popular continue to be spearmint and peppermint.

With as many fragrant and culinary applications as there are for mint, it is surprising that more gardens do not boast at least a few useful varieties. Unfortunately, mint has developed a somewhat justifiably bad reputation as an aggressive plant capable of spreading throughout an entire bed — or yard.

However, you can easily keep this hardy perennial under control by simply growing it in containers, and never planting it directly into garden soil.



In fact, an herb garden can look quite striking with several decorative terracotta pots set in place among other plantings. The pots alone will add an air of formality and height to the bed, as will the one to two-foot tall spikes of pale lavender or pinkish-lilac flowers favored by bees and butterflies alike.

Beyond the medicinal benefits touted by ancients like Dioscorides, mints can play a central role in fun and fanciful kitchen recipes. For example, you can pinch off a handful of the creamy-white variegated leaves of pineapple mint and toss them into a mixed green salad.

Use leaves of orange mint to flavor your favorite cup of herbal tea, adding the distinctive bergamot flavor you will recognize from Earl Grey, although, in fact, it is an oil derived from the Orange Bergamot tree (*Citrus aurantium bergamia*) which actually gives the tea its aromatic tang. Also, any strongly-flavored mint will add zest to a refreshing pitcher of iced tea or lemonade. And peppermint leaves can be mixed with fresh-grated ginger to create a soothing yet invigorating tea.

Naturally, bourbon (and horse) fanciers will migrate toward a table offering frosted tumblers of mint juleps. In fact, an old friend from Kentucky makes a point of always having a whisky barrel planter full of spearmint at hand, both for Derby Day and warm summer evenings.

Spearmint mixed with bulgur wheat, red onions, tomatoes, parsley, and a lemon-vinaigrette makes for a delicious tabbouleh, the Lebanese national salad. It can also be added to omelets, soufflés, or your favorite quiche recipe.

Peppermint is probably the best variety for drying, and coarsely-ground leaves add a delicious new complexity to steamed carrots, new potatoes, eggplant, or black beans, as well as baked chicken or poached fish dishes.

Curly mint is favored by chefs as a garnish for desserts created with chocolate or fresh fruits, although chocolate mint is also a nice option and a wonderful and tasty surprise for visitors to your garden.

Mint can also become a dessert in itself, either as a simple sorbet, or incorporated into brownies, chocolate cake batter, or the ever-popular grasshopper pie.

Some mint species also have a handsome place in the landscape. For the edge of ponds or even soggy, moist areas in your garden, water or bog mint (*Mentha aquatica*) is ideal, although it can spread rapidly. It is also one of the mints best known and prized in antiquity, and can be used in teas and salads, although the menthol overtones are a bit too strong for some palates.

For a strong-scented ground cover, consider Corsican mint, a fast-spreading plant with tiny leaves which enjoys being walked upon. Use it in somewhat shaded areas between paving stones instead of mulch, gravel, or grass, and tuck it into nooks and crannies in stone retaining walls. Pennyroyal is a sun-loving groundcover with a lemony aroma, sometimes used in small amounts to flavor meat and fish dishes.

With just a bit of experimentation, you may find yourself as enthralled with mint as were the classical botanists, although your choices can exceed theirs by many hundreds.

Would You Care for a Mint?

Alpine Mint Bush *Prostanthera cuneata*
 Apple Mint *Mentha suaveolens*
 Austrian Mint *Mentha Gracilis*
 Banana Mint *Mentha arvensis*
 Basil Mint *Mentha spp.*
 Blue Balsam Mint *Mentha piperita*
 Chinese Mint *Mentha haplocalyx*
 Corsican Mint *Mentha requienii*
 Curly Mint *Mentha spicata* 'Crispa'
 Chocolate Mint *Mentha piperita* 'Chocolate'
 Egyptian Mint *Mentha niliaca*
 Emerald & Gold Mint *Mentha viridis variegata*
 Epicurean Mint *Mentha eqicuratus*
 Ginger Mint *Mentha gentillis*
 Grapefruit Mint *Mentha peperita* 'Grapefruit'
 Habek Mint *Mentha longifolia* 'Habek'
 Japanese Mint *Mentha arvensis piperescens*
 Kentucky Colonel Mint *Mentha x cordifolia*
 Lavender Mint *Mentha piperita*
 Lemon Bergamot *Mentha piperita* 'Citrata'
 Lime Mint *Mentha piperita* 'Citrata'
 Moroccan Mint *Mentha spicata*
 Orange Bergamot *Mentha aquatica* 'Citrata'
 Oregano Mint *Mentha origanum*
 Pennyroyal *Mentha pulegium*
 Peppermint *Mentha piperita*
 Pineapple Mint *Mentha suaveolens* 'Variegata'
 Silver Mint *Mentha longifolia*
 Spearmint *Mentha spicata*
 Swiss Mint *Mentha piperita* 'Swiss'
 Water Mint *Mentha aquatica*

Other members of the family:

Australian Mint Bush *Prostanthera rotundifolia*
 Catmint *Nepeta grandiflora* (other spp.)
 Catnip *Nepeta Cataria*
 Horsemint *Monarda clinopodia* (aka: White Bergamot or Basil Bee Balm)
 Jamaican Mint Bush *Satureja viminea*
 Lemon Balm *Melissa officinalis*
 Mountain Mint *Pycnanthemum flexuosum*



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viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit www.greenmanshow.com.

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